

Under the Lasch

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)

1980

In response to “Lasch: Theory of Passivity Stumbles” by Bob Brubaker, in this issue, page 6.

Despite many excellent observations on fallacies in Lasch’s work, I think it necessary to clear up some questions of methodology raised in your article. In particular, I must dispute your claim that by focusing as we did on the motion toward social passivity and recuperated, (i.e. pseudo-) individualism, we are embracing a theoretical notion of humanity as passive object determined mechanistically by social conditions or that we are putting forth the idea that no other motion exists in society. This is the old conundrum of human beings making/being made by history, and hardly needs reiteration.

I am not going to defend psychoanalytic and critical theory. We use many concepts, at least as intellectual tools, that we have taken from these works. Our indebtedness to them as well as to Marxism, anarchism, and situationism shows clearly in the terminology and the concepts which we employ to posit certain social and historical problems.

Nor am I going to defend Lasch from your criticisms, many of which, by the way are at least suggested by my own criticism in the last issue of the *Fifth Estate*. Perhaps I should make a point of repeating that what excited us the most about Lasch’s book was not his call for a new “rational” form of authority based upon some Spartan or state socialist mentality, but his ability to highlight certain elements of conformism, defeat and malaise running through this society, this sense of desperation which pervades almost every sphere of activity, including acts of unconscious rebellion against authority which are taking place around us.

We haven’t assumed that humanity has been reified by exogenous forces. That structures of alienation are the result of practical activity is self-evident, just as it is evident that these structures include bureaucracy, militarism, conformism and escapist strategies. That character structures correspond to certain forms of association and the decomposition and emergence of different forms is not so clear. It is not a question of simple causality.

Human beings created capitalism because of flaws in their character structure, flaws which came to be exaggerated and encouraged in turn by the conditions which capitalism inevitably had to produce. It is easy to declare, but not so easy to defend, the statement, that “People are quite simply, not objects,” when indeed they behave like objects, and more and more under Modern conditions continue to shed the diversity, intelligence and will which they exhibited in earlier times, and come to resemble the standardized objects which they produce, and which in turn reproduce their creators. The old observation that people resemble their pets comes to mind: people today look more and more like the monstrosities which have been created out of the praxis which is precisely that tension between creative autonomy and conformist passivity.

You begin by trying to extirpate passivity from the human landscape and end by seeing nothing but resistance. In fact, you claim that “the crisis of modern society is the consequence of that resistance.” Possibly. Or perhaps society has simply run out of steam, socially, technologically and psychically, and is awaiting (or drifting towards) the confrontation through which it will either reconstitute itself or be destroyed.

The question remains: how rebellious are the rebels? What kind of revolution will the isolated snipers—or the Levittown gas rioters, for that matter—make? And how passive are the passives? Are they passive enough to put

on uniforms when ordered and crush the rebels? Will the Brenda Spencers turn up wearing brown shirts? Have arsonists and disaffected high school students made a definitive break? Resistance must become conscious or it is doomed to become recuperated. To tout the autonomy of the “masses” and disregard the emotional plague which keeps us all in line is to make the error on the social plane which you rightly accuse the economic catastrophists of making in the economic-political plane. A sniper here shoots wildly at a school; there ghetto residents loot furniture stores during a blackout; here someone sets fire to trash dumpsters: signs of imminent revolution growing out of a conscious sense of what can be, or age-old elements of a monstrous society going through a continuous process of self-cannibalization?

You accuse us of a “growing conviction” that human beings are incapable of learning from experience and changing the conditions of their life, of pessimism. This, however, is not enough, and you go on to argue that self-preoccupation “might be better understood as the necessary precondition of a radical assault on existing conditions.” Apart from the latent determinism in your own statement concerning “necessary preconditions” for a radical juncture, you neglect the fact that I already suggested in my article that the erosion of the work ethic, the liberation of sexuality and other modes of personal self-fulfillment “could...signify a necessary, though chaotic stage in making a consummate break with capital. “ What you mistakenly describe as our conviction that the revolution has already been defeated is our desire to know the extent to which domestication of the species has been accomplished in order to find a way out of the capitalist labyrinth.

We are not opposed to “self-preoccupation” per se; what concerns us is the ability of human beings to find avenues of such self-preoccupation which are not simply dished out as part of the program provided by capital. How much “self-activity” is made up of pleasure cruises, drugs and booze, hobbies and sports; how much rebellion collapses into spectacularized events resembling television melodrama; where is self-activity genuine, tending towards a conscious struggle against this society in all its forms?

Pessimism, which we do not admit for a moment, can only take another falsification, which is optimism, as its negation. I prefer to avoid both, although I cannot help but share your intuition of certain “necessary preconditions” for liberation, as determinist as that may be.

I believe that human beings who make a revolution that is fueled solely by hate and rage and not also by conscious struggle to achieve a vision of a better life will only end in recreating this same set of conditions in another variation. Revolution will be conscious or it will not be at all.

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